



The Corrymeela Podcast - Season 2

Thanks so much for listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. You might like to discuss the episode and the accompanying questions with friends, family, or a discussion group, or just use them for your own writing and reflection.

If you're part of a group, be mindful and considerate of one another's willingness to engage in the discussion - leave space for people to keep their reflections to themselves if they want to. You might also want to agree on some general principles to stick to, like: everybody's invited to speak once before anyone speaks twice, and: try to assume that everybody is speaking with good intent.

In group discussions at Corrymeela, we seek to locate political and religious points of view within the story of the person speaking. If you're gathering as a group, consider how to create a sense of connectedness among you.

You might like to choose one or two of the Very Short Story questions that we like to put to guests at the end of each episode. Your answers to these can be one sentence long, or a few. Belongings are plural, as are identities and nationalities. So feel free to respond to these story prompts in a way that reflects your own story.

- What's something important that you've changed your mind about?
- Are there books, poems, films, albums, works of art, etc that you've turned to again and again?
- Tell us about a time when your national identity felt important to you.
- Tell us about a time when you felt foreign.
- Is there a very short story you can tell us about a time when you said something that surprised you?
- Has anyone ever said that you were disloyal to one of your cultures or identities? Why?



Season 2, Episode 2. Marina Cantacuzino reflection questions & episode transcript

1. Whilst acknowledging that there's no perfect way of defining forgiveness, Marina mentions several different possibilities for doing so. Is there one that resonated with you particularly? What alternatives would you add?
2. Was there anything in this conversation that particularly surprised you? Or that you'd want to add to?
3. Marina links forgiveness to compassion, and the need to acknowledge the flawed humanity which is in all of us. Do you find that a helpful framing? What are some of the other mental/emotional shifts that you think might help people to forgive?
4. Marina talks about pain as 'the great motivator' to forgive. Has this been true in your analysis and experience? What are some of the others?
5. Marina mentioned lots of different types of forgiveness: conditional forgiveness, forgiveness of strangers, forgiveness of family and friends, public/political forgiveness. What's your view on the relative importance/ possibility of those different elements of forgiveness? How are they different? How are they the same?
6. Marina talks about the ways in which she addresses her own need to forgive. She mentions spirituality, talking to herself, talking with others. Do you have a tool or practice that enables you to forgive, to navigate bitterness or resentment, or to address negative feelings more generally?

Marina Cantacuzino is an award-winning British journalist who, in response to the imminent invasion of Iraq in 2003, embarked on a personal project collecting stories in words and portraits of people who had lived through violence, tragedy or injustice and sought forgiveness rather than revenge. As a result, Marina founded The Forgiveness Project, a UK charity that uses the real stories of victims and perpetrators to explore how ideas about forgiveness, reconciliation and restorative justice can be used to impact positively on people's lives. She is also the creator of The F Word Podcast and author of three books on the topic of forgiveness, including *Forgiveness: An Exploration*, which was published by Simon & Schuster in 2022.

Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast: exploring stories and ideas about conflict, peace, theology, and art.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Hello, my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is Marina Cantacuzino. She's a writer and campaigner and storyteller, and the founder of the charity The Forgiveness Project. Her book Forgiveness: An Exploration was published in 2022. So Marina, thank you very much for joining us.

Marina Cantacuzino:

Oh, it's really a great pleasure, Pádraig, thank you for inviting me.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

A real pleasure, yeah. As we start, Marina, I am curious as to whether there's any experience or friendship in your childhood that you feel prepared you for the work that you do now.

Marina Cantacuzino:

Um... That's a- You can hear me pausing there! I've never been asked that before. And the reason why I'm hesitating is that I don't think so. I don't think anything prepared me for this work. I think it was curiosity, and my sort of innate nature to be a peacemaker, if you like, that led me to really wanting to unpick and understand what forgiveness meant. So sort of forensic investigation, if you like, as- my background's journalism. So maybe that makes sense.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And were you a forensic investigator, as a child?

Marina Cantacuzino:

I was always asking why! I got a cup in my primary school for asking questions. Maybe- and the other thing, I mean, person in my childhood who probably influenced me most was my mother. She was always fantastic at saying sorry, you know, like, mothers and daughters often fight. And she was always the first to say sorry. And she was, she was quite a gentle- deeply religious, Catholic. And I think I learned and gained a lot from having her as a mother.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'm curious, like you mentioned already journalism. I'm curious to hear about what drew you to journalism- I think you've already begun to answer that question. Are there other things too that drew you there?

Marina Cantacuzino:

Well, the one thing I knew as a teenager was that the one thing I loved doing was writing, and I felt it was the only thing I could do. And at that time, I wrote poetry, which I don't do anymore, actually. But I think like most adolescents, I wrote a lot of poetry. And so the only thing that actually got me into journalism - because we're talking a few decades ago now, before email, and everything - was I sent off an article in the post to the Guardian, which got published. And it was just something I felt I had to write; it was because I had a brother, who had a hereditary disease, Duchenne muscular dystrophy, and died when he was 17. And I felt I wanted to write about what it was like to be the sibling of a brother who was going to die. And d'you know I didn't expect it to be published. And I really believe that if it hadn't been published, I would never have become a journalist, but it gave me a lot of confidence. And in those days, I think it was an easier profession to have actually.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Sure.

Marina Cantacuzino:

And so I was a journalist for 20 years - 15 years, maybe - before founding The Forgiveness Project.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And was your brother younger than you Marina?

Marina Cantacuzino:

Yeah, four years younger.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Four years. So you were in your early 20s When he died?

Marina Cantacuzino:

Yeah, I was 21. He was 17, yeah.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

D'you think that there's a connection between your interest in forgiveness and an experience of grief like that?

Marina Cantacuzino:

Yes, I do. I think, you know, there's- I think forgiveness is tied up with loss- giving up your justified right for revenge, giving up your certainty. You know, giving up what you've lost. And I also think I was quite comfortable in stories of pain. So, throughout my journalistic career, I really focused on telling other people's stories, of people- how people had dealt with very difficult situations- sometimes overcome them, sometimes not. That was my kind of focus. And I think it was because of my experience with my brother that I felt comfortable - a strange word to use maybe - but I did feel kind of comfortable around trauma and pain and death and all those very difficult subjects for young people.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. Well, I'm struck by how young people often want a real clarity of conversation about that, and often adults in their lives want to kind of tiptoe around it, but younger people actually have the capacity...And as you talk about comfort, the word that came to my mind was familiar. And you know 'familiar' and 'family' share some etymological roots...

Marina Cantacuzino:

Ah, yes.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You were- you were familiar in a way that you probably didn't want to be but you had no choice.

Marina Cantacuzino:

Yeah. That's a lovely point you made. Thank you.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

How- like I'd like to talk about The Forgiveness Project, but before we go on to the founding of it, I'm curious how you at this stage would define forgiveness.

Marina Cantacuzino:

Well, at this stage um, I, again, hesitate because there's whole reams and books and theses written about what forgiveness is and what it isn't. So, I've landed on one unsatisfactory kind of definition, if you like, but, forgiveness is making peace with things, or people, that we cannot change. And the reason why that is insufficient, is that it doesn't bring in the most important part of forgiveness, which is that it's about it...it requires a degree of compassion and empathy for the person that's hurt you. So it's different from letting go. It's more than acceptance. And do you know I heard one academic who's written a lot

about forgiveness once say that he's abandoned all definitions, he just uses the word freedom now. And I quite admired his, his position there, and I could understand how he'd come to it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Is that an irony for you, Marina, to be involved in a project called The Forgiveness Project where the term itself evades definition? Because people have strong feelings about the term. But - and I'm sure you must get asked all the time about how you define it - and I can hear your, I can hear the hesitancy about it, 'cause it's an explosive topic at times which I know you talk about.

Marina Cantacuzino:

It is, and people have assumptions about it: that it's weak, that it's about condoning and excusing, that it lets people off the hook; or that it's this incredible, magical key to serenity that will fix everything, you know, so it's polarised in that respect. I think, um, there was a very good - description, rather than definition - that Mark Twain said, he said 'forgiveness is the fragrance from the violet on the heel that crushes it'. And the reason I like that- it shows that forgiveness grows out of damage, that it's messy, but that it's also potentially a healing balm if you like...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

So, um, Marina, in 2004, you founded the charity, The Forgiveness Project, and in a certain sense it was around the time of the Iraq war- I'm curious about what it was about the Iraq war, and your work as a journalist, and forgiveness, that all came in together towards this project?

Marina Cantacuzino:

Yeah. Well, again, it sort of came unexpected in the sense that I was a feature writer, I was never a political journalist. And, um, I cared passionately about social issues, but I wasn't particularly up on all the latest politics of the day, if you like. But, I was infuriated. I was absolutely convinced that the harder you come down on people, the more they will regroup, and re-emerge in a more resistant and angry way. So I went on the march in Hyde Park, which was 20 years ago, this year. And I felt that I wasn't listened to and I wasn't heard, and I then, as a journalist thought, well, what can I do? I've got a small voice. Um, I want to bring more stories into the world that show a counter-narrative here; I want to find stories, where people haven't sought revenge and haven't sought retaliation, because, as far as I could see (and many others), the invasion of Iraq was an act of false revenge for 9/11. And the language of the time was payback, and tit for tat, and if you're not with us, you're against us. And none of it made sense to me. And so that's how I started really trying to find these stories from victims and survivors who'd experienced atrocity or harm of some sort, but who had sought peaceful solutions. And along the way I also wanted to talk to former perpetrators who had transformed their aggression into a force for peace. And that's how it started- there was a year of research, I was travelling a lot with a photographer

at the time for our journalism. And I asked him if he'd do it with me; it was a very private project- I didn't know where it was going, or what would happen to it. But in the course of a year, we collected 26 stories, which then became an exhibition called The F Word. And that was so successful, that's what actually led me to found The Forgiveness Project.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Already, I can hear a distinction - and I'd love you to talk about it - a distinction between the pragmatics of forgiveness, which is about, you know, trying to stop the cycle of revenge and retaliation. And, that's quite distinct from a moral imperative to: one must forgive. Could you talk about that line for you, and where you fall on it and how you hold it?

Marina Cantacuzino:

Well, I think I had a very simplistic view when I started out collecting these stories. And I want, of course, the stories is a rich territory - includes stories about reconciliation, restorative justice, empathy, compassion - but I really wanted to focus on forgiveness. And it was quite soon into talking to people, and particularly when I spoke to someone called Alistair Little in Northern Ireland who was a former UVF paramilitary, who'd been in prison and killed a man when he was very young. And he said to me very clearly: I don't want to be part of this, whatever you're doing - because at that point, I didn't really know what I was doing, other than collecting stories - but he said: I don't want to be part of anything that re-victimises victims by telling them they should forgive. And then I thought, oh, no, nor do I, that's the last thing I want to do. I don't want these stories to make people feel bad about themselves because they can't forgive, because already I understood that forgiveness was this terribly messy, difficult area, which, you know, was a choice. And, some people choose not to forgive and actually cope very well in the world. Um, but others see it as a lifeline and a saviour and it's, it's what's got them through, opened their hearts- broken open their hearts. So right from the beginning, these stories that then did become the F Word exhibition, I absolutely knew they had to be authentic, they had to show people's vulnerability; they couldn't all end in this sort of place of extraordinary forgiveness, because that would be totally alienating. And I think I succeeded in that respect, because I'm sure that's why The Forgiveness Project continues to this day and continues to be, um, a place where people can not only learn but actually also help them to overcome their own hates and resentments and difficulties.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah the exhibition of stories and photographs is a travelling one; I know it's travelled all around the world, you know, in museums and schools and libraries and cathedrals and in public; in outdoor spaces, too... Um, do you see that forgiveness is- well, I suppose, let me ask this in another way: what else is a good response to pain? You know, forgiveness might be one if it's freely chosen; what else is a good response?

Marina Cantacuzino:

Yeah. Well, I think it depends on the time- I mean, there's certainly some responses that help for a bit. That might be medication, denial, silence. Just not thinking about it. Refusing to go there: accepting it's happened, not hating, but refusing to go there. Um, but I think some of those responses to pain can lead to self harm, and can lead to, um... I mean Maya Angelou said, 'The greatest agony is an untold story'. And she said that because for five years she was silenced. She didn't speak, she was in silence because of an abuse that happened to her as a five-year-old. And so I think these other methods that we find to cope with [our] pain can work for a while, but very often, they don't. And these very strong emotions can become overwhelming. The regret, the resentment, the bitterness, the hatred, whatever it is and people look for other ways. And very often it's a conscious decision to line yourself up to forgive.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'm sure there must be times, and I'm not asking you to tell us, but I'm curious about the wisdom from it about people who say: oh, can you remove something? Or: can you not use that story anymore? How does that work for you?

Marina Cantacuzino:

It's barely happened, interestingly enough, and we recently checked with everybody who'd shared their story: did they want to change it, update it, take it off? And while some people might stop telling their story in public- we've had one or two people who've come into prisons to share their stories with us, and they don't want to do that anymore- they've done it enough, it's not serving them anymore. It's really almost never happened that someone wants to take it down from the public domain of The Forgiveness Project website. And if they have changed it, it's just like, updated it. So they're kind of universal in a way.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Interesting. But yet you continue to check- that sounds important.

Marina Cantacuzino:

Yeah. And we keep in very much close contact with a lot of our storytellers who, who are really the heart of the organisation, the lifeblood of it, and who work with us, you know, on numerous projects that we're doing- many of them do.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama, and this is The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is Marina Cantacuzino: writer, journalist and founder of The Forgiveness Project. You quoted Maya Angelou

just there talking about stories that aren't told. And I'm curious about your approach towards stories and to- in a certain sense that you define what forgiveness is and isn't through the lens of stories rather than definitions. What is it - besides journalism - what is it about story that draws you?

Marina Cantacuzino:

Well, I think, you know, as human beings, we need stories in our life. And...they build empathy. They allow us to connect with others, they take us into the lives of others. And they broaden our perspective. I think only with stories - whether it's told verbally or you read it or hear it - can we understand how others live their lives. So it's critical, and you'll see that stories are used everywhere: in businesses, in charities, of course in journalism. Stories stick, whereas facts fade: that's why they're so powerful. And you know, people often do talk about the power of story and its power of narrative. Of course, it's so powerful that it can be used to also fan the flames of prejudice, and normalise hate. Um, so I think it's very important, you know- the whole point of The Forgiveness Project is to put these stories - I call them restorative narratives, stories which focus on empathy, compassion and forgiveness - put these stories out into the world as a counter-narrative to the ones that we hear so often about hate, insularity, division, and intolerance, etc.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Those are big binaries, you know: empathy, compassion and forgiveness, and hate, insularity... Could you talk a bit about the binaries of those- what's in between the binaries?

Marina Cantacuzino:

Well, yeah, you're right. There's, I mean, I'm- certainty is, is unhelpful in every respect. So of course, there's, there's nuance in between those two binaries. And I think it all starts really with- I mean, that's- The Forgiveness Project really does cover everything, I think, from the people who refuse to forgive because they haven't received an apology, or it's a genocide and how can you forgive a genocide? So [there are] people - and very few of these - who for whom it is a spontaneous...epiphany, almost. But most who work towards it, and who frame it very differently, and many of those that I've talked to don't forgive. Um... you know, I'm thinking perhaps, of Gill Hicks, who lost both her legs in the London bombings. And she said: how can I forgive? You know, the bomber took his own life, he robbed himself of, of my ability to forgive him. But, she said: where I'll put my flag down is on the table of understanding. I want to understand. And then you have Rami Elhanan, whose daughter was killed in a suicide bombing in Israel, and he says: I do not forgive and I do not forget, but, the bomber was a victim just like my daughter- grown bitter from shame and poverty. And he's the most peace-loving and forgiving man you could ever meet, and yet, will not use the word forgiveness. So, you know, these are all fascinating things for me.

There's also a woman who was raped, who says: I understand that forgiveness could really help release me, and free me, but I refuse to do it, I will not grant it- not because I can't, but because I won't. Because I want to stand in solidarity with all the women who've been raped. And to grant forgiveness for my attacker would be to condone other attackers. So all these positions have value. There's no right or wrong: everybody's position is different. And everyone's experience is different, and I think that's what I and we at The Forgiveness Project have tried to share.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

It's a complex web that you hold, and I know that you have a resistance to any idea of oversimplification in response to pain and responses to pain. You know these are huge issues, these are enormous pandemics, really: war, violence against women, predatory relationships to the bodies of others. And, you know, to speak about those is difficult territory, and to bring the word forgiveness into those is difficult territory, and yet you do it and you insist on being able to hold a complex narrative. Is that a dangerous thing to do in a day when things can be reduced to a Twitter headline, or when you can be easily cast off for being too naive or too ideological, or whatever? How do you do that?

Marina Cantacuzino:

Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think- um...I have had pushback from people who make assumptions about what The Forgiveness Project is. They assume that it's prescribing forgiveness as the best way of dealing with all hurts. So I do then signpost people to the stories because there are clear stories there, that say that is not the case. And I think some people have been- assumed that we're coming from a Christian perspective, um, because forgiveness is so clearly wrapped up with the Christian faith. And, and they get disappointed when we're not. So I think- also I had a psychotherapist who- a friend had a book group, and in the book group was a psychotherapist and the friend had suggested that they read my book for that month, and she absolutely refused to, she refused to open it actually - the psychotherapist - she apparently said: how can I read something that is suggesting that hurt people should forgive? So you do come across that, but I- you see, why I like it in a way is because it always creates - well, usually creates - a conversation. People do have strong feelings, and I also always say in the heat of battle - whether it's with a sibling or it's with a tribe or a country - it's probably not appropriate to even consider forgiveness; forgiveness is part of the mending...you know, the building back, the aftermath, that's where it becomes helpful, and healing.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

One more question, as we stay with story, you know, does looking at big stories and powerful stories and stories that in a certain sense might divide- does that give you a good inroad to thinking about forgiveness? Is our smaller, more modest stories about small pains between friends or siblings or

spouses or neighbours, are those also ones you look at or do you tend to go towards ones that are quite, um, elevated in terms of their public interest and drama?

Marina Cantacuzino:

I did that initially, because as a journalist I knew that those are the stories that grab attention. And interesting, I just had a book come out last year and there was a chapter in there about personal forgiveness, a chapter in there about self-forgiveness, but it received a lot of press, but all the press focused on the big stories. Um, I think in a way, people are intrigued by them. And the reason- there are some smaller stories about relationships, parental relationships, but most of the larger stories also reflect smaller stories if you like, so an example of that is a woman who was abducted and left for dead in the boot of a car, found a week later and just - just - survived. After that, she found it far easier to think about forgiveness for her attacker than she did about her friends who later betrayed her and sold her story to the newspapers. So, there are layer upon layer of forgiveness, and I think what's been heartening for me is right from day one of founding The Forgiveness Project, I've had emails and letters, messages from people saying: thank you for these stories, they've really helped me deal with [a] problem I'm having in my own life. So, while they are big, you're absolutely right, and some might say they can't relate to them, because they are to do often with bombs and atrocities and abuse. If you read how these people have dealt with the pain (because pain is the great motivator to forgive) and if you can take the big event away and sort of translate your own suffering into it, I think there's value and lessons to be learned in all the stories.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What lessons have you taken from the idea that somebody would find an escalated level of extraordinary trauma, like an abduction, easier to forgive than friends who betrayed you by selling a story to the newspaper? What do you - as you step back from the particularities of that - what wisdom do you take from it, or insights?

Marina Cantacuzino:

I think that it's easier to forgive the greater wrongs of strangers than the smaller wrongs of loved ones. I think betrayal- you know, the minute you bring relationship into it, the hurt is immense. There's trauma that comes with, with something like I just described with the woman who was abducted, because that is a deeply traumatic experience. Um, but when you're talking about betrayal, then the hurt is, is on a different level. And in some respects, harder to forgive, because we had hopes for that person; we had beliefs, we told ourselves that it would go one way and it goes another way. And I think forgiveness is giving up the expectation that people will behave as we want them to.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama, and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is writer and founder of The Forgiveness Project, Marina Cantacuzino. Marina, you mention categories of forgiveness in your book: political, personal, public, you know, forgiveness after a random act of individual violence, forgiveness after an attack. Are there things that strike you about the distinctions and similarities between forgiveness as it manifests in different spheres?

Marina Cantacuzino:

The chapter in the book I found most difficult in a way to write was about political forgiveness, because it felt very different in some respects, and you could almost sort of write it off and say: this isn't appropriate to talk- forgiveness is between one person and another, and that's where it's powerful. And some people - within that personal forgiveness, if you like - some people require an apology, and that's conditional forgiveness. They require remorse in order to move on and rebuild. And other people don't- it's an act of self-healing and self-survival. But when you talk about political forgiveness, it can feel very different 'cause you're talking about administrations, you're talking about leaders, you're talking about organisations. There are those who say that without accountability and without justice, there should be no forgiveness, and forgiveness diminishes - the very idea of forgiveness - to consider that these gross atrocities should be forgiven. But, you know, then you go down the hole- I'm fascinated with what the French philosopher Derrida says. I don't know if you know this Pádraig, but he talks about how the only things that are to be forgiven are the unforgivable. In other words, everything that can be mended through restitution, reconciliation, justice, it doesn't call for forgiveness; what calls for forgiveness are those wounds and hurts so deep, and maybe have gone back generations, that cannot be healed. And he's sort of saying, how else can we do it? And in a similar way, Hannah Arendt said: 'the only antidote to the irreversibility of history is the faculty of forgiveness'. So, you know, while I might baulk a bit about talking about forgiveness in a, in a political setting in the end, I actually had to create two chapters out of it, cause there was so much to say and of course, I wrote quite a lot about apology as well, because that seems very, very prescient.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I mean, I was going to ask you both about apology and about reparations within the context of this. How would you speak about those three - about forgiveness, apology and reparation - in, in the same sentence, or, how would you sketch out the complex relationship between those three things? ...Maybe, maybe the same paragraph!

Marina Cantacuzino:

Well, yes, I mean I think it all starts with acknowledgement. If things aren't, if wrongdoings aren't acknowledged by, you know, perhaps successive governments or by the people who perpetrated them,

then they get lost. And they have to, they have to be put down in the history books, and in the schoolbooks if you like, so that once an atrocity in a political setting has been acknowledged, then you've got somewhere to go with that. And then I think you come to accountability and justice. And, um, there's transitional justice, which is when governments put into place compensation, possibly, but some sort of recognition of victims needing help. And then there's restorative justice, which brings together perpetrators and victims, which is even more helpful, because it's a way of seeing your enemy as human, and about mending broken relationships and breaking hearts. And then, only then I think, when some of these building blocks have been put into place, can you talk - start to talk - about forgiveness.

And there have been some interesting initiatives: there's one in Sierra Leone, for instance, a group called Fambul Tok (which means Family Talk), that after the very bitter and enduring civil war, where former rebels were coming to live next to the families of those they'd massacred- a little like Rwanda, if you like. Um, and they didn't know how, how this could work 'cause the prisons were overflowing. And this group Fambul Tok actually did forgiveness ceremonies in the villages, round bonfires, again, a little like - but kind of different - to the Gacaca courts in Rwanda. And these were processes where people could come forward and publicly apologise, sincerely apologise, and then be encouraged to forgive. Now apparently, it had a very profound effect and worked very well in that culture, building on the indigenous methods of that territory and of that country. So I think- I wouldn't say that you could um, you could ever make forgiveness mandatory. I don't think a government can ever say its people should forgive, but you can create conditions where forgiveness becomes a possibility and I think in some respects, um, it's very important. I mean, Duncan Morrow, who you may know, who's the - he works in the University of Ulster, worked in the peace process in Northern Ireland a long time - he talks about the impossible but essential need for forgiveness in Northern Ireland. And I think he puts it so well: impossible yet essential...about sums it up.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What are you like as a forgiver, Marina?

Marina Cantacuzino:

I was thinking about it recently. I went to a conference on forgiveness in Israel just recently, and we were asked to do a meditation. And we [were] asked to think of someone we could- we needed to forgive and...and I shut my eyes and, and I couldn't think of anyone- not a single person came up that I had a beef with. And then later I was thinking, oh my God, but I forgot about this couple of massive things that have happened in my life. That I know others have said to me: I could never forgive that, I could never forget that. But, I don't know, I don't know why, but I just, I just think people are flawed. And I, I'm flawed.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And, do you have a personal practice for, you know I can hear, you said it earlier on that forgiveness is a way of letting go of a certain kind of control about what a relationship will look like in the future and what expectations you have about that. Do you have a way of disentangling yourself from those expectations on a daily basis? I'm asking for a friend, here!

Marina Cantacuzino:

When you say daily practice, do you mean a spiritual practice?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

No, no, I suppose just a meditation or, yeah, I'm curious- d'you, do you have something you do to keep that kind of equilibrium in yourself?

Marina Cantacuzino:

I do- I do the worst thing, I have actually practised Buddhism for many years. Um, but, I - I don't know if it's to do with that - but actually I just talk to myself a lot, and I'm sure that is not a good thing to do. So actually, you're supposed to get rid of all the thoughts. You know, but I really talk myself out of... Obviously, I can feel resentful, and I can feel jealous. And, you know I hate those feelings. All those feelings are really, um, unhelpful, and they can get stuck in your- lodged in your brain. So I find the best way of dealing with it for myself is to talk myself out of it, and to talk to my friends.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And when it comes to thinking about those kinds of practices, how do you hold those together with some very public recent examples where somebody's been asking for forgiveness in public; I'm thinking of that British politician who had gone onto a reality TV show and in the context of a reality TV show apologised and was asking for forgiveness from whoever was watching it. And then on another level, you know, governments apologising and asking for forgiveness for having come up with Covid rules, and then broken them while they were coming up with them. Um... Government apologies too for, you know, the Grenfell fire disaster in London. How do you hold the idea of personal practices about talking to your friends and all of those things, in response to the ways within which forgiveness is often used in public? 'Cause, I know you're, I know you're cautious about power, sometimes the word forgiveness in the context of institutions, or people even, with great power, it can seem like it's just further manipulating, and the idea of somebody like you or anybody having a private thing about- oh I'll talk to my friends, and I'll, I'll try to reflect on this and reflect on that and it just feels like you're being taken for a ride. How would you respond to that or, how do you think about those things?

Marina Cantacuzino:

Well, I think the power of apologising and the power of asking for forgiveness is that it can be refused. And I think you shouldn't, one shouldn't ever forget that. So with the politician that you're talking about, he's perfectly entitled to ask for forgiveness- at least it means that he recognises he's done something wrong. Um, and then that forgiveness can be forthcoming or not, from those who were harmed by this particular person. Jeremy Clarkson recently asked for forgiveness for the terrible things he said about Meghan Markle, and he wrote it on Instagram, and it is really a blueprint for how not to write an apology; he used the word 'I' about 32 times (I counted), and he said: can we please move on now? he says - you know, that sort of tone. So, it comes across as insincere. Um, and you can do it without actually using the word forgiveness or apology. When the Queen in - I think it was 2011 - went to Ireland for the first time, she wore green. And she talked about her sorrow of the way things had gone. There was no apology there, because that often opens the way for calls for reparation and people are very reluctant to do that, but it was something.

And, Willy Brandt went to Warsaw after the war. And, he wanted to say something about the terrible atrocities that had happened to the Jews there- he was the chancellor of Germany at the time. And he just fell to his knees. And he was asked afterwards why he'd done that, in front of the monument to the Jews, the slain Jews, he fell to his knees, genuflected, and he was asked why he'd done that. And he said, 'I did what any human being would do when words fail them'. And it was such a symbolic - and seemed to be totally spontaneous - movement towards forgiveness. So I think it's highly complex, as you intimated, when politicians start to talk about asking for forgiveness when they've done something wrong, but I would just say that it can and often should be refused, potentially. And, and I think another area where it's complex- there was a report that came out a couple of years ago, ongoing report into religious and other institutions, which found that forgiveness had actually furthered the problems in these institutions, because victims had been encouraged to forgive. So this is why I think it's so multilayered, multidimensional, this subject, and it's too easy just to talk about forgiveness as this panacea for all ills.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And in the midst of the possible abuses, I can hear that you want people to be intelligent about forgiveness, but not necessarily to be converted or convinced by it as the only response. Is that true? Or do you hope that people will forgive a bit more? Or does it just depend?

Marina Cantacuzino:

I do, I do hope, generally, that people- I think there are certain circumstances and environments and contexts where it's very important to talk about how forgiveness may not be helpful. But overall, I think

we live in a very unforgiving society. I think, the, you know, the rhetoric of who's right and who's wrong and the certainty that people have; and people talk across each other so much of the time. And I think these are elements where I think it's really important to make forgiveness more a part of our lexicon, even if we don't call it forgiveness. It's about compassion, really.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama, and you've been listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today has been Marina Cantacuzino. Her book Forgiveness: An Exploration is published by Simon & Schuster. It's available in all the usual places. And Marina, thank you so much for coming on The Corrymeela Podcast and sharing with us your thoughts and complexities about forgiveness.

Marina Cantacuzino:

It's been a great pleasure, thank you again Pádraig for inviting me.

The Corrymeela Podcast is created in partnership between Corrymeela and FanFán. It's produced by Emily Rawling, with mixing, editing, and theme music by Fra Sands at Safeplace studios, and presented by me, Pádraig Ó Tuama. The podcast is generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, and the Community Relations Council, Northern Ireland, and the Irish government's Reconciliation Fund. Thanks to them, and thanks to Corrymeela's friends and supporters, and thanks to you for listening.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Marina with everybody that we're interviewing for season two of The Corrymeela Podcast, we're going to ask some Very Short Story questions. I'd love to hear a very short story in a minute or a minute and a half or a couple of sentences about this: could you tell us about a time when one of your identities felt important to you? Everybody comes with lots of identities- could you tell us about a time when one of them felt particularly important to you?

Marina Cantacuzino:

I'm thinking of my identity as a mother. I had this interesting experience: my son, who's an adult now, loved wearing dresses when he was about two or three, and, and wigs and had Barbie dolls: the lot. And I thought it- me and my husband just found it adorable. And we were astonished, and surprised, and a little bit appalled that most often people said: my god, you're so good, aren't you worried...you know: should you let him do that? And I was- felt so strongly about it I wrote an article in the Guardian, and my son was photographed for it looking adorable in his dresses. And it was- the article was all about: how come tomboys - you know, girls who wear trousers and want to be boys - are heralded and admired, whereas we're not allowed our little boys to wear dresses. And the reason I bring this up as my identity

as a mother- a friend, who's a psychotherapist said to me shortly after: you shouldn't have done that. He didn't give you permission to write that article. And, you know, long story short, I came to understand she was absolutely right. Because when he was 10, he was mortified. I had to beg the Guardian to take it off the internet, which they did, amazingly. Now he's in his early 20s, and actually, he's quite proud of it. So things change. But, but it was like, I didn't really protect him. Uh, I learned something there.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What would you say at this stage, you learned from that?

Marina Cantacuzino:

That we have to be very careful with other people's stories, that it was really not my story- I thought it was my story to tell as a mother, but actually was just as much his story to tell. Maybe he will tell it one day.